The Builder.

No. CCCLXXXII.

SATURDAY, JUNE 1, 1850.

TWO subjects of more than ordinary interest occupied the attention of the Institute of Architects on Monday, the 27th ult., namely, the presentation of the royal medal to Mr. Barry, and the question of progress in architecture. Earl De Grey took the chair; and Herr Zahn, of Berlin, who has published some fine illustrations of the decorations in Pompeii and Herculaneum, and is visiting this country to study its monuments, was introduced to the meeting.

The President, when he rose, said, that before discharging an agreeable duty that devolved on him, he must interpose a few words about himself. Fifteen times, he believed, they had suspended the standing order which provided that the same person should not hold the office of president more than two years consecutively, and had named him for that office. He was deeply sensible of the compliment, and could assert, conscientiously, that he felt as much pleasure in being of service in the capacity of their president as pride in being elected. His present duty was one of the pleasantest that could occur to him. He had been instrumental in obtaining her Majesty's testimony of goodwill to the profession and respect for art, in the shape of the royal medal. He had, at first, feared there would be difficulty in awarding it. The present was the third presentation; and he must say he thought the council had up to this time shown both disinterestedness and discretion. This year, for the first time, it was conferred on one of their own body. Then addressing Mr. Barry, his lordship said—It gives me great satisfaction, Mr. Barry, to present to you this testimony of the good opinion of your professional brethren. Your earlier works have been long known; but, as a matter of course, it is with particular reference to the magnificent work you have now in hand for the nation, that this medal is presented to you. Your great predecessor, Wren, laid the first stone and the last stone of St. Paul's Cathedral. I trust the same fate may be yours. On that building he was occupied thirty-four years; you have not yet spent half that time upon yours; and if it had depended on yourself alone, more of it would already have been done,—the means have been withheld, and difficulties have been unnecessarily created. Wren, in his building, had but one purpose to consider; you have the Lord knows how many; and what he did was for people who knew what they wanted. This is not the case with you; your masters are legion; and numbers of the gentlemen of the House of Commons, when they ask questions, positively do not know what it is they want. The Westminster Palace is at once the most difficult and most magnificent work ever attempted. The wants are so varied, and the means of supplying them were so little understood, when it was commenced, that the task is most complicated. As one of those appointed to overlook the works, I have had opportunities of seeing the difficulties in your path and the way in which you have overcome them, that others had not. I have the greatest pleasure in handing you this testimony of the approbation of your professional brethren, and trust you may live long to enjoy the recollection of it.

Mr. Barry said, with evident feeling, he hoped they would do him the justice to believe that he was deeply impressed by the honour which the Institute had conferred on him, and the manner in which their respected president had conveyed it. It was difficult for him to speak; he begged they would imagine the feelings of pride and gratification such a testimonial must inspire in him. He felt that he owed it mainly to his accidental engagement on the greatest work of modern times. He was fully sensible of its defects as compared with the wonderful works remaining to us of the mediæval period. These defects proceeded from want of no anxiety on the subject, no absence of efforts to do better, but from the want of time, experienced by all modern architects, and of that proper frame of mind to produce with full effect the æsthetical development of a design. The difficulties thrown in the way by the executive department, too, were great, and would be understood by those whom he addressed. He would consider the receipt of the royal medal an evidence that he had not wholly failed in his endeavour to produce a fine work. Amongst all the honours which had been conferred on him by foreign academies and others, he should ever cherish this as the proudest memorial of his professional career.

The hearty cheers which he received on sitting down, added to Lord de Grey's remarks, must have served as a comforting plaster for any sore caused by the long debate in the House of Commons on the previous Friday, when Mr. Osborne, supported by Sir B. Hall and Lord Robert Grosvenor, repeated the attack on Mr. Barry, and were replied to by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Greene, Sir W. Clay, and others. Mr. W. Cubitt, too, came out for the defence, and spoke to the purpose. He said it was easy enough to estimate the expense of a plain building, or even of a decorated building in a style which was well known and practised; but it was different when, as in the present case, there was little previous experience of the style of architecture, and no experience at all with regard to a building of such magnitude. The drawings which were originally laid before the contractors afforded no idea of the decorations which had subsequently been introduced. As to the question of how it happened that the building had become so much more highly decorated than could originally have been anticipated, he could say nothing. But as one who felt some regard for the credit of his country, and who was proud of the honour of a seat in that House, he begged to say that he thought the country did well to erect a structure, which was destined to last for centuries, in the highest style of art that could possibly be produced; and, from what he had seen of it, he had no hesitation in saying that there was no building in Europe which could bear a comparison with what the Palace of Westminster would be when finished. He did not think that a country which was under the necessity of spending between 50,000,000*l.* or 60,000,000*l.* a-year, and which he hoped would be able to afford to spend that sum, ought to grudge 200,000*l.* or 300,000*l.* for ten or twelve years for such a building.

Mr. Barry may think it fortunate that the indisposition of Lord de Grey led to the presentation of the medal being postponed till after the debate in question. One of the charges made on that occasion, namely, that the House will not afford accommodation for the members, and that, according to Mr. Drummond, "make what alterations they please, they must at last knock down one end of it to get room," will probably be replied to by Mr. Barry.

To return, however, to the institute. After the presentation of the medal, Mr. J. T. Knowles read a paper, announced as "On the Application of Cements and other Artificially Formed Materials, to the Exteriors of Buildings," in which the writer defended, and urged, the use of cements for the external covering and decoration of buildings, maintaining their superiority over stone in many positions, for securing a warm, dry, and healthful habitation, and asserting that the work of man's mind, no matter how mean the medium through which it is expressed, should be regarded as far more important than the use of costly materials. A considerable portion of the paper was devoted to the condemnation in strong terms of the trammels, in which, as he maintained, architects were kept by a small non-professional party, and the system of merely copying the works of the middle ages. We shall print some portions of the papers hereafter, and merely say thus much as to its spirit, to elucidate our notes of the discussion that ensued.

The first who rose was Mr. Francis, who expressed his regret that Mr. Knowles had introduced into a paper on cements, matter which he must think was not in accordance with its title.* He must in his turn protest against the doctrine that had been laid down. Cements were very useful in their place, but that was surely no ground from which to deduce the general assertion that modern architects, in emulating, or rather as he should say, endeavouring to catch the spirit of the mediæval artists were merely copyists. In the middle ages, Mr. Knowles had said, the architects of that day would not go back; the architects of the thirteenth century did not copy those of the twelfth, any more than those of the fourteenth copied them. This was quite true, and it was because they were thoroughly imbued with all that had been done, and were following out the style to more complete development. This was not the case with us. He could not help referring to the works of those who were advancing the "novelty theory," which were as bad, he thought, as anything could be, and were nevertheless copies. As to the two buildings of classical character shown by the lecturer,† they did not present a single pilaster, a single ornament, a single moulding, which was not copied from ancient examples. He considered that in our present state we could not do better than endeavour to emulate the mediæval architects. There seemed no objection to covering plain surfaces with cement, but to attempt to introduce it for enrichments and delicate mouldings, seemed to him most erroneous. He trusted that the spread of science would lead to the discovery of means of rendering ordinary building stones able to resist rain, and would conclude by asserting his conviction, that if a new style is to be formed, it would not be through the use of cement.

Mr. Scott quite agreed with the last speaker. He also agreed, he said, with Mr. Knowles in the belief that we were in shackles,—but these were the shackles of knowing too many styles

* Mr. Knowles has since informed us that the title of the paper should have been given as "On the propriety of the application of Cements, or other artificially formed Materials, to the exteriors of Buildings."

† Exhibited simply as views of early works in cement.

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